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A Secret Salvage Operation

Ronald Reagan has quietly promoted a U.S. diplomatic push to salvage the Lebanon troop-withdrawal plan. NEWSWEEK has learned that the president recently sent Gen. Vernon Walters, his ambassador at large, on a mission to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to enlist their support. High-ranking State Department officials have repeatedly talked with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, and U.S. envoy Arthur Hartman has buttonholed Soviet officials about the dangerous drift toward Syrian-Israeli conflict in Lebanon. In Washington this week, U.S. ambassadors to Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon are to join Mideast envoy Philip Habib and his deputy, Morris Draper, for a policy review. On the agenda: how to break the impasse and persuade Syrian President Hafez Assad to pull his troops out of Lebanon.

Something clearly had to be done. Assad had pronounced the troop withdrawals "dead," and the PLO was still entrenched in the Bekaa Valley. Still, the administration had some hints of progress to show for its efforts. The Walters mission "went well," according to one informed source. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia avoided outright endorsement of the Israeli-Lebanese agreement, though they did support the idea of a Syrian troop withdrawal. By the administration's count, that meant that all but four Arab states—Libya, North and South Yemen and Syria itself—have indicated public or private support for an Israeli-Syrian troop pullout. On the down-

Walters: A secret trip

Wally McNamara—Newsweek



side, Saudi Arabia may have only just begun to use its substantial leverage to nudge Assad into a more conciliatory position. And the talks with the Soviets were fruitless. The Americans warned that a prolonged face-off between Israel and Syria in Lebanon could trigger another shooting war. The Soviets countered that the Syrians were acting defensively and that Israel was the aggressor.

The brainstorming session at State was not expected to produce a quick fix for Lebanon. The meeting could be Habib's last act as special Mideast envoy. Damascus has refused to deal with Habib ever since the signing last month of the U.S.-sponsored Lebanese-Israeli accord, and administration sources indicated he will probably be replaced by a new high-level negotiator.

On a visit to Washington last week, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Yehuda Ben-Meir promised that the government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin would give Reagan's diplomatic effort "all the patience we can have." What that meant remained to be seen. Parents of Israeli servicemen in Lebanon have demanded that Begin bring their sons home. In the Knesset last week, the opposition Labor Party called for a phased withdrawal of Israeli forces—whether or not Syria followed suit. Begin rejected a unilateral withdrawal. He insisted that Israel had "absolutely no intention of attacking the Syrians." But with all sides dug in and no one willing to budge, the danger was that the troop-withdrawal plan would go the same way as the Reagan plan for the West Bank. And that sort of reversal would once again cripple any chance for peace.

ANGUS DEMING with JOYCE BARNATHAN
 in Washington and MILAN J. KUBIC in Jerusalem